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WHY AM I A BAPTIST?

THE primary ideal of Baptists is not to build up an ecclesiastical system, but to create high and manly Christian character. In other words, it is to create in each individual soul and life a legitimate independency of all men, in matters of faith and practice Godward. The more Christlike each man becomes in his estimates and standards of character, the more he will prize his individual rights as one of Christ's freemen, and the more sacredly he will guard the rights of others. As Baptists have no formulated and authoritative creeds or decretals to which all their members must subscribe, few outside of their own ranks have made their tenets and practices a special study, or are capable of giving such an account of these as their churches would pronounce either fair or correct. Possibly none of the other large Christian bodies commonly known as "Evangelical" suffer so much from misconception and misrepresentation; hence, a candid reader will be grateful for an honest answer to the question: "Why am I a Baptist?"

The Baptist Year Book for 1886 reports 28,953 Baptist churches in the United States, with 2,572,238 communicants. These do not form one united church under an enforced standard of doctrine and a prescribed order of government, from which no congregation may vary. The aggregated sect is denominated by itself as the "Baptist Denomination," and not the Baptist Church, because each separate congregation is held to be a complete New Testament church in itself. These thousands of churches, therefore, are entirely distinct from each other, and are independent in the management of their several internal affairs, much after the pattern of private families in social life. Their only visible element of unity is the Bible and the common faith and practice which they severally gather from its teachings. In the United States there are 1,305 Baptist associations, but these organizations hold no analogy to the synods, presbyteries, conferences, or convocations of other Christian bodies. Voluntary associations are

formed by the churches of any given vicinity simply for fraternal purposes. In these they confer with each other about the scriptural application of their common principles, the subject of missions, the best methods of church work, the establishment and support of educational interests, and, if any church seeks advice in the management of its own affairs, the association will give it counsel. Its suggestions, however, in all cases, are merely advisory, and can in no wise bind the church which seeks its advice. All the churches hold that Christ has reserved to Himself, as the Head of the churches, the absolute right of legislation for their government, and that He has laid down His changeless statutes in the sacred Scriptures ; consequently no Baptist body claims legislative prerogatives. Then all executive and judicial rights are lodged by Him in the churches themselves. From the decisions of the individual church, in all that concerns its own affairs, there can be no appeal, so that within its own jurisdiction its application of New Testament laws is final. It pretends to no infallibility in its interpretation of those laws, and hence it may seek the counsel of other churches in difficult cases, but it reserves final action to itself, because it is quite as infallible as those sister churches, who necessarily know less of its affairs, after the fullest explanation, than it knows itself. They can neither instruct it nor hold it under any authority whatever when it declines to follow their advice, and so each church is as absolute a spiritual democracy for all the purposes of self government as if it were the only church organization on earth.

In the exercise of these democratic rights, it forms itself into a church in the first place, without the assistance of any outside body. Its only officers are a pastor and deacons ; it directs in the administration of the ordinances which Christ has appointed ; it receives its own members generally by a majority vote given in its business meetings ; it enforces its own discipline by the exercise of its popular suffrage, and is self-governing in all respects. Each member stands on an exact equality in all that relates to the exercise of his voice and vote in the management of its affairs, from the pastor down to its obscurest member, and everything necessary to its well-being is done in open assembly, much after the form of the primary town-meeting in the body politic. The pastor is a member of the body which he serves, and not of a separate clerical order outside of the church. He is responsible

only to his own church, being answerable to it for all his conduct, private and official. His settlement, dismissal, or punishment for wrong-doing are entirely in the hands of his own congregation. Necessarily, his moral influence is larger than that of other members of his flock, provided that he maintains a high grade of pastoral consistency and Christ-like character; but his office invests him with no ecclesiastical authority above that of any other member. This democratic parity is maintained on our Lord's decision: "All ye are brethren." His pastoral duty consists in feeding and tending the flock of Christ, under the direction of the Great Shepherd, so that he is the servant of the church for Christ's sake, while Christ is his only Master and theirs. Thus, the organic character of a Baptist church brings every member thereof back to his individual responsibility, on the broad basis of liberty and equality, removing membership therein as far as possible from all savor of officialism. The natural tendency of this liberal system is the cultivation of a proper respect for his own enlarged manhood. Of course, a self-willed man, or a supine and ignorant man, who has little regard for his better nature, will act unworthily of this highly honorable order of church life and of the sacred trusts which it imposes, just as the same class of men disgrace their own citizenship in the State. But as free citizenship is adapted to lift the freeman above mere residence in the State, so in this case, freedom from every yoke which would bind a Baptist to the unquestioning obedience of church superiors lifts him far above the membership of a mere conventionalism in the church of Christ. Such religious democracy cannot be true to itself, unless it conserves the rights of others, on principle. But where this is guarded, the personal Christian must love Christ more than ecclesiasticism, must be a better disciple of Christ than a churchman, and must give freer scope to his individual thought and action than he can command where his voice in church management is denied. He is bone of the bone which frames the church of his choice, and, being free from all outside domination, he stands as the peer of his brethren in the discharge of equal duties and the exercise of equal rights. Such a democracy is educative and every way calculated to make an entire brotherhood relatively strong in Christian manliness, robust in a self-reliance which these stout principles must inspire when they are held and used intelligently.

Many characteristics are fostered and developed in Baptist churches by their radical requirements concerning the material of which they are composed. Many foolishly suppose that the chief difference between them and other churches is found in the questions growing out of baptism. A greater caricature could scarcely be drawn than that which is couched in this mistake. Possibly, it grows in part out of the name "Baptists," for, unhappily, the names of Christian denominations generally are sad misnomers in this age. Judging from these alone, it is natural to suppose that baptism draws the line of demarkation between Baptists and others ; but for the same reason it might be supposed that the only difference between Presbyterians and others is found in that they have a Presbytery ; or in the case of Methodists, that they follow the lines of method ; or in that of Episcopalians, that they hold to an Episcopacy in government. Yet, none of these regard their name as characterizing their chief differences with their brethren. All of them, under their several definitions, claim to have a valid baptism, an efficient Presbytery, an order of bishops, and a methodical rule of life. Wherever these honorable bodies may locate their distinguishing differences, the Baptists place theirs in the demand for a positive moral change wrought in the soul of the convert, by the direct agency of the Holy Spirit, as an indispensable qualification for membership in their churches. The New Testament, in describing this change, uses the several phrases, "born from above," "born of God," "born again ;" a state commonly known in Evangelical parlance, as regeneration by the Holy Spirit. This condition peremptorily forbids all membership in the churches secured by civil law, as in State Churches ; all birthright membership secured by infant baptism ; and all place in the churches secured by a merely intellectual subscription to a set of tenets or to an ecclesiastical creed. The very essence of the Baptist position is found in the fact that an intelligent personal trust in Christ for salvation forms the basis of Gospel church life. The rejection of infant baptism and submission to immersion according to the New Testament are pure corollaries of this vital requirement. Neither the rejection of infant baptism nor submission to immersion, nor both together, make a Baptist. The first qualification is found in thorough soul regeneration, and these considerations touching baptism are purely secondary thereto. Neither can baptism be put in the place of

regeneration, nor be so associated with the new birth that the one does not exist without the other. Baptists never administer baptism to the firmest believer until he has satisfied the church that he is regenerate already ; then, because he is regenerate, his regeneration entitles him to baptism. Having satisfied the church that a divine work has been wrought on his moral nature, this is attested by his "burial with Christ in baptism." Christ has nowhere empowered his church to violate the free choice of any human being, by forcing baptism upon him without his personal knowledge of Christ as his Saviour ; and when he has voluntarily taken upon him the service of Christ, the church has no right to deny him this privilege of discipleship ; hence, he is baptized, not to regenerate him, but because he is entitled to baptism as one who is already regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

In keeping with this view, Baptists hold that no church has the right to add to its membership those for whom Christ did not appoint specific terms of membership. He bestowed on every man the absolute right to examine and embrace Christianity for himself, and by the end of the first century, every precept and practice which he enjoined were embodied in the New Testament. That book, therefore, informs every person what order of obedience the Christian Scriptures require at his hands, and of what material the Apostolic Churches were composed, so that under these circumstances, no church of after times has the right to tamper with, much less to alter or deviate from, the Apostolic model. For this and other reasons, the Baptists protest against making any tradition, patristic or catholic, any creed, canon, law, or decree, no matter how old it may be or by whom constructed, the fountain of doctrines, ordinances, or government. They appeal to the Scriptures alone, and will stand or fall on their teachings. Herbert Spencer in his "*Data of Ethics*" (p. 257), expresses the hope that the ethical principles laid down by Christ will eventually be acted upon in the practice of the world. But Baptists insist that for all religious purposes the New Testament shall be appealed to now, as well as for all moral ends, and that in such an appeal duty to himself links every man to the divine right of interpreting for himself what those Scriptures teach. He is bound by every consideration which is worthy of his nature to shake off all false deference for other authority, to use all the powers of his mind in an independent investigation of the New Testament, with the

pure-hearted purpose to be governed by its facts and truths. But in consideration that he is not infallible, he must divest himself of all conceit, and come to the investigation as an honest and reverential seeker of the truth, for the truth's sake. The right of privately interpreting the Scriptures, as the gift of God to every man, does not carry with it the right of any man to follow his own fancies, predilections or whims in choosing what he will obey and what he will throw aside, nor does it allow him to diverge from or add to its teachings, as his convenience may dictate. This, at the best, would be mere trifling with the truth, which must finally convert the doctrine of liberty into rebellion against its Author. No church can step in between the Scriptures and the personal convictions of the man who searches the Scriptures for the purpose of honestly obeying them, nor can it enforce any teaching upon him by sheer authority, though that teaching itself be purely Scriptural. Church authority is nothing here against personal conviction, nor has the civil magistrate the power to prescribe a religion for his fellow-man, neither has he the right to punish them for rejecting the religion which the State prescribes.

This broad doctrine of soul-liberty the Baptists have maintained for century after century, against the rack, the dungeon and the stake in Europe ; and against fine, imprisonment, scourging, and banishment in America during its early history. This is abundantly clear from the writings of Locke, Milton, Roger Williams, Jeremy Taylor, Motley and Bancroft. In regard to their sufferings in this country, a most frank and reliable account of their struggles for religious liberty has just been given by Brooks Adams, son of the late Charles Francis Adams (Chap. IV.), in his "*Emancipation of Massachusetts.*" Baptists sincerely regret that all men are not Christians, and would rejoice if all Christians held their principles ; but they resist the assumed right of all churches to connect themselves with the State, and they resist all governments which arrogate to themselves the prerogative to establish a church, or even to maintain religion itself by law,—to support the conformists to any church, to punish the non-conformists,—or to interfere in any way with the free exercise of any man's religion. They would not submit to have their own doctrines or practices enforced either upon themselves or others by any human government or statute. The laws of Massachusetts

banished them for about half a century ; as early as 1656 the laws of New Netherland fined, imprisoned, and banished them ; and in Virginia they were hounded by the same cruelties till after the Revolutionary war. Virginia law proscribed them until their right to worship God "according to the dictates of conscience" was secured to them by the 20th section of its "Bill of Rights." Even the Constitution of the United States did not fully protect them at first, as its VI. Article left Congress at liberty to impose religious tests in other cases than those of "office or public trust under the United States." The entire Baptist body, without a known exception, supported the Revolution, and, as free Americans, they demanded a guarantee of religious liberty ingrafted into the organic law of the land. Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry, and others, stood by them, and on the 8th of August, 1789, they laid their claim to full religious liberty before Gen. Washington, then President of the Union. He also espoused their cause, recommended to Congress, and on September 23d, 1789, by his influence, caused the amendment found in the I. Article to be passed, which says that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Baptists reject the doctrine of toleration in religion, and demand absolute religious freedom as the inalienable right of all men, because, by implication, the power which claims the right to tolerate others also claims the right to crush them when it chooses to tolerate them no longer. They maintain that so far as the civil law is concerned, a man may be a Jew, a Mohammedan, a Christian of any sect, a Pagan, or an infidel, with impunity.

As far back as 1527, the Swiss Baptists, in their confession of Schleithem, drew the distinction between the right of the civil power to enforce civil law and order, and its power to punish for religion. In 1614, Leonard Buscher, a Baptist of London, wrote to King James, in his Plea for Liberty of Conscience : "May it please your majesty and Parliament to understand that, by fire and sword, to constrain princes and peoples to receive that one religion of the Gospel, is wholly against the mind and merciful law of Christ, dangerous both to king and state." Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, said, in 1644, that "it was the will and command of God that permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and counties. That

civil states with their officers of justice are not governors or defenders of the spiritual and Christian state and worship." All Baptists agree with these, their great ancestors, that every form of disability or persecution for religion is radically wrong, and should a Baptist rob any man of his religious liberty by statute, penalty, or sword, in that act and for that reason he would cease to be a Baptist. Everywhere they have been put to death for this doctrine of religious freedom. On the plains of the Netherlands and in higher Germany, in the Alpine valleys and crags of Switzerland, and in the cities of England, the ashes of their martyrs have been the sport of fitful winds and brutal men, for their fidelity to this principle. Indeed, the true history of the Dutch, German, and Swiss States, of Great Britain and the United States of America, cannot be written apart from the philosophical positions of this peculiar and ancient Republic of churches on the subject of civil and religious liberty. According to Bancroft, the most pronounced and best defined rights of man, which fifty millions of American freeman boast to-day, find historic recognition in the chronicles of their struggles and progress. The germinal idea of all Baptist life is, and ever has been, that the eternal law of God lays the axe at the root of all class, condition, or caste in religious life, and that the religion of Christ is an elevating democracy for every soul of man.

Again, Baptists utterly reject the effete system of sacramentarianism, as unworthy of human belief and contradictory of Christ's efficacious mediation. Neither baptism nor the Lord's Supper were ordained by Him for the purposes of human salvation. The ample and even infinite provisions which He made to that end are found in the sacrifice of Himself and the work of the Comforter. Therefore, Baptists insist that His ordinances shall be left in the places which He gave to them, and shall not be made to usurp His saving office and honor. His body was buried first in the waves of the Jordan, then in the tomb of Joseph, and baptism preaches like burial with Him. The religious use of all the waters on the globe has never removed one stain of sin from man's conscience or heart, neither can bread and wine, taken at the supper, impart the grace of God or prove its existence in the soul of the communicant. The only design of the supper is to "proclaim His death till He come." So far from exerting a saving influence, in part or whole, upon the souls of those who receive

these ordinances, He enjoined them simply as acts of personal obedience to Himself. They are monuments of the great work which He wrought for us, but neither of them can be moral renovators of the soul. Baptists believe that there is no more dangerous heresy than that which invests baptism with any moral power or magical energy in purifying the heart, or that which makes it in any sense the channel through which the saving grace of God is conveyed to man. They also hold that it is quite as dangerous a heresy to make the supper a test of Christian fellowship, a proof of Christian character, or a visible bond of Christian love. From Judas Iscariot down, thousands have sat with Christ's disciples at one common table, who were entirely destitute of Christian character, affection, or fellowship. The act of partaking at the same supper table, neither Christianizes those who gather there nor un-Christianizes those who do not. The New Testament is a stranger to all such arrogant ecclesiastical assumptions. Christians celebrate two symbolical acts in observing the ordinances, nothing more, for Christ Himself is their Saviour, not his ordinances. His mediation saves men, not their baptism; and their souls feed, not on the loaf of the supper, but on Him, the True Bread from heaven. The Apostle James finds the true test of Christian love, fellowship, and character, in feeding and clothing a destitute brother. The Apostle Paul finds it in distributing to the necessities of the saints, in their bearing each others' burdens, in forbearing with each other and forgiving each other, and in doing good of every sort to those who are of the household of faith. The Apostle John lodges it in a willingness to lay down their lives for each other, if need be. Yet the Master of all these Apostles puts it on a higher plane than any of them, when he locates true love in the golden rule: "Whatsoever ye will that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." This test is worth something, because it costs something, having cost him his own life. That sacramentarian standard which tests and proves Christian love and character by the act of eating bread together and drinking of the same cup, is of too cheap an order to meet the requirements of Christ and His Apostles. Strangers who never met before, who have never passed a word or exchanged a kind act with each other, are ever and anon receiving a morsel of bread and taking a sip of wine in common at the Supper, but what special love do they show to each other in that act more than they

had previously shown before such a meeting? When the divine tests of love established by the New Testament are pushed aside, and one Christian comes to measure his love to another by a circumstantial act in which any hypocrite or profane person may share, if he pleases to do so, it is time to ask the question: "Whether or not ecclesiasticism is erecting its own standard or Christ's?"

For reasons equally cogent and scriptural Baptists reject that sacramentarian doctrine commonly known as infant baptism. No well defined ground has yet been taken in justification of this practice but that chosen by Augustine and adopted by the Roman Catholic communion, namely, that if an infant dies unchristened it is excluded from Heaven. This position is consistent with itself, because it holds that baptism is regeneration *de facto*, and as the babe is defiled by original sin, that, therefore, baptism secures its salvation. Those who christen children outside of the Catholic fold have never yet been able to define what practical moral relation the christened babe holds either to God or man, the church on earth or the church in Heaven, which he did not hold before his christening. Some of the Protestant state churches of Europe give this verbal definition, and all of them give it in substance, namely, that baptism makes him "A child of God, a member of Christ, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of Heaven." Thus the nominal membership of these churches is made up of those who are christened according to the law of the land, and its inhabitants are brought into the state church without their knowledge or consent. Other churches than those which are established by law, both in Europe and in America, are strangely perplexed as to the relation which a christened infant sustains to their church organizations. They hold that before his baptism the unconscious babe is as much regenerated as after. They further hold that, before his christening, he is not a member of their churches, and yet, that, after his baptism, he is not so united with the church as to discharge the proper duties which devolve upon the recognized members of that body. He is not expected to meet its responsibilities, to contribute to its support, to attend its worship, to honor its brotherhood, to share its privileges, not even in receiving the Lord's Supper, nor to answer to its watchful discipline for his bad conduct. Then, if his infant brother or sister dies unchristened, these churches understand the Gospel

too well, and love it too much, to suppose for a moment that the gate of Heaven is shut in his face for that reason,—a conclusion which all who are Christ-like in Heaven and earth must approve.

From the teachings of the New Testament, Baptists are compelled to believe that the helpless infant who is taken from the bosom of his parents on earth, whether those parents be Christians or heathen, Jews or Mohammedans, religionists of any sort or infidels, is, by virtue of our Lord's mediation, eternally sheltered and beatified in the bosom of the Lamb of God in Heaven. Further, Baptists are deterred from the christening of their infant offspring by that God-fearing, parental love which will not pervert a Gospel ordinance by submitting a babe thereto, and so leave him in a nondescript relation which he is a stranger to in the Gospel. In their apprehension of a pure New Testament church, to christen him would leave him stamped neither with the distinctive mark of the regenerate nor of the unregenerate. To christen him, would assume that he is not exactly fit for heaven if he should die unbaptized, nor entirely fit for full fellowship in the church on earth if he lives and is baptized. For this and many other reasons, Baptists say with Lange, of Jena, who is far enough from being of their communion : "Would the Protestant Church fulfill and attain to its final destiny, the baptism of infants must of necessity be abolished." As it has already been said, the primary thought with Baptists is to make men stalwart Christians, who know what they believe, and why they hold their faith. They make baptism so subordinate in the Christian system, that instead of enforcing it as a fundamental act in the religious life of a human being, they do reverence to that new immortal life by first teaching it the knowledge of sin, the need of a Saviour, and the precious act of loving Him. As they attribute no merit nor virtue to baptism, they first consecrate him to Christ as a being endowed with reason and responsibility. They dedicate him to God in the holiness of parental prayer, watchful love, and holy training ; then, as soon as he is able to discern the Lord's death, they labor to win him to Christ's cross that he may take Christ's yoke upon himself by personal choice. No amount of ecclesiastical blame, misrepresentation, or even contempt, can make a Baptist of brain and manly honesty see the consistency of baptizing his infant when out of the church, and then leaving him there until by his personal conversion he is allowed to come in, because that con-

version has made him fit for the church both below and above. Nor can he as a parent, responsible to God, impose upon his child the injurious notion, that because he has been christened as a babe, he has somehow entered into covenant with God, to which covenant he was not himself a party. This would delude the child with the notion that he is not to be saved precisely as unchristened children are. If his baptism did not engraft him into Christ and His church, it will greatly perplex him to know what it meant; and if it did so engraft him, he must conclude that some moral relation exists between Christ and himself which unbaptized children do not sustain; and hence, that he needs no such spiritual regeneration as they need. Baptists cannot put their children under the deleterious spell of such a contradiction and superstition. They must be led to Christ first, to be saved by actual trust in His redeeming merits without the use of baptism, and then they must be baptized in obedience to His command, because they love Him and voluntarily obey Him. These are some of the reasons, and but some, "Why I am a Baptist." Regeneration and not baptism is the soul of a Baptist church. These democratic bodies agree with Dr. Jacob, of the Church of England, who says, in his "Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament" (p. 270): "Notwithstanding all that has been written by learned men upon this subject, it remains indisputable that infant baptism is not mentioned in the New Testament. No instance of it is recorded there; no allusion is made to its effects; no directions are given for its administration. However reasonably we may be convinced that we find in the Christian Scriptures 'the fundamental idea from which infant baptism was afterward developed' and by which it may now be justified; it ought to be distinctly acknowledged that it is not an apostolic ordinance."

THOMAS ARMITAGE.